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WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

LONDON

ELKIN MATHEWS, CORK STREET

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BORDERLANDS	(1914).	
THOROUGHFARES	(1914).	

BATTLE

BY

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

LONDON
ELKIN MATHEWS, CORK STREET
M CM XV

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TO MY WIFE

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BEFORE ACTION

I SIT beside the brazier's glow,
And, drowsing in the heat,
I dream of daffodils that blow,
And lambs that frisk and bleat—

Black lambs that frolic in the snow
Among the daffodils,
In a far orchard that I know
Beneath the Malvern hills.

Next year the daffodils will blow
And lambs will frisk and bleat;
But I'll not feel the brazier's glow,
Nor any cold or heat.

BREAKFAST

We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,
Because the shells were screeching overhead.
I bet a rasher to a loaf of bread
That Hull United would beat Halifax
When Jimmy Stainthorp played full-back instead
Of Billy Bradford. Ginger raised his head
And cursed, and took the bet; and dropt back dead.
We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,
Because the shells were screeching overhead.

THE BAYONET

This bloody steel
  Has killed a man.
I heard him squeal
  As on I ran.

He watched me come
  With wagging head.
I pressed it home,
  And he was dead.

Though clean and clear
  I've wiped the steel,
I still can hear
  That dying squeal.

THE QUESTION

I WONDER if the old cow died or not.
Gey bad she was the night I left, and sick.
Dick reckoned she would mend. He knows a lot—
At least he fancies so himself, does Dick.

Dick knows a lot. But maybe I did wrong
To leave the cow to him, and come away.
Over and over like a silly song
These words keep bumming in my head all day.

And all I think of, as I face the foe
And take my lucky chance of being shot,
Is this—that if I'm hit, I'll never know
Till Doomsday if the old cow died or not.

THE RETURN

He went, and he was gay to go:
  And I smiled on him as he went.
My boy! 'Twas well he couldn't know
  My darkest dread, or what it meant—

Just what it meant to smile and smile
  And let my son go cheerily—
My son . . . and wondering all the while
  What stranger would come back to me.

SALVAGE

So suddenly her life
Had crashed about that grey old country wife,
Naked she stood, and gazed
Bewildered, while her home about her blazed.
New-widowed, and bereft
Of her five sons, she clung to what was left,
Still hugging all she'd got—
A toy gun and a copper coffee-pot.

DEAF

THIS day last year I heard the curlew calling
By Hallypike,
And the clear tinkle of hill-waters falling
Down slack and syke.

But now I cannot hear the shrapnel's screaming,
The screech of shells:
And if again I see the blue lough gleaming
Among the fells,

Unheard of me will be the curlew's calling
By Hallypike,
And the clear tinkle of hill-waters falling
Down slack and syke.

MAD

Neck-deep in mud,
  He mowed and raved—
  He who had braved
The field of blood—

And as a lad
  Just out of school
  Yelled: "April fool!"
And laughed like mad.

RAINING

THE night I left my father said:
"You'll go and do some stupid thing.
You've no more sense in that fat head
Than Silly Billy Witterling.

"Not sense to come in when it rains—
Not sense enough for that, you've got.
You'll get a bullet through your brains,
Before you know, as like as not."

And now I'm lying in the trench
And shells and bullets through the night
Are raining in a steady drench,
I'm thinking the old man was right.

SPORT

And such a morning for cubbing—
The dew so thick on the grass!
Two hares are lolloping just out of range,
Scattering the dew as they pass.

A covey of partridge whirrs overhead
Scatheless, and gets clean away!
For it's other and crueller, craftier game
We're out for and after to-day!

THE FEAR

I DO not fear to die
'Neath the open sky,
To meet death in the fight
Face to face, upright.

But when at last we creep
In a hole to sleep,
I tremble, cold with dread,
Lest I wake up dead.

IN THE AMBULANCE

"Two rows of cabbages,
Two of curly-greens,
Two rows of early peas,
Two of kidney-beans."

That's what he is muttering,
Making such a song,
Keeping other chaps awake,
The whole night long.

Both his legs are shot away,
And his head is light;
So he keeps on muttering
All the blessed night.

"Two rows of cabbages,
Two of curly-greens,
Two rows of early peas,
Two of kidney-beans."

HILL-BORN

I SOMETIMES wonder if it's really true
I ever knew
Another life
Than this unending strife
With unseen enemies in lowland mud,
And wonder if my blood
Thrilled ever to the tune
Of clean winds blowing through an April noon
Mile after sunny mile
On the green ridges of the Windy Gile.

THE FATHER

THAT was his sort.
It didn't matter
What we were at
But he must chatter
Of this and that
His little son
Had said or done;
Till, as he told
The fiftieth time
Without a change
How three-year-old
Prattled a rhyme,
They got the range
And cut him short.

THE REEK

To-night they're sitting by the peat
  Talking of me, I know—
Grandfather in the ingle seat,
  Mother and Meg and Joe.

I feel a sudden puff of heat
  That sets my ears aglow,
And smell the reek of burning peat
  Across the Belgian snow.

NIGHTMARE

THEY gave him a shilling,
  They gave him a gun,
And so he's gone killing
  The Germans, my son.

I dream of that shilling—
  I dream of that gun—
And it's they that are killing
  The boy who's my son.

COMRADES

As I was marching in Flanders
A ghost kept step with me—
Kept step with me and chuckled
And muttered ceaselessly :

" Once I too marched in Flanders,
The very spit of you,
And just a hundred years since,
To fall at Waterloo.

" They buried me in Flanders
Upon the field of blood,
And long I've lain forgotten
Deep in the Flemish mud.

" But now you march in Flanders,
The very spit of me ;
To the ending of the day's march
I'll bear you company."

THE LARK

A LULL in the racket and brattle,
And a lark soars into the light—
And its song seems the voice of the light
Quelling the voices of night
And the shattering fury of battle.

But again the fury of battle
Breaks out, and he drops from the height—
Dead as a stone from the height—
Drops dead, and the voice of the light
Is drowned in the shattering brattle.

THE VOW

Does he ever remember,
  The lad that I knew,
That night in September
  He vowed to be true—

Does he hear my heart crying
  And fighting for breath
In the land where he's lying
  As quiet as death?

MANGEL-WURZELS

Last year I was hoeing,
Hoeing mangel-wurzels,
Hoeing mangel-wurzels all day in the sun,
Hoeing for the squire,
Down in Gloucestershire,
Willy-nilly till the sweaty job was done.

Now I'm in the 'wurzels,
In the mangel-wurzels,
All day in the 'wurzels 'neath the Belgian sun.
But among this little lot
It's a different job I've got—
For you don't hoe mangel-wurzels with a gun.

HIS FATHER

I QUITE forgot to put the spigot in.
It's just come over me. . . . And it is queer
To think he'll not care if we lose or win,
And yet be jumping mad about that beer.

I left it running full. He must have said
A thing or two. I'ld give my stripes to hear
What he will say if I'm reported dead
Before he gets me told about that beer!

HIT

Out of the sparkling sea
I drew my tingling body clear, and lay
On a low ledge the livelong summer day,
Basking, and watching lazily
White sails in Falmouth Bay.

My body seemed to burn
Salt in the sun that drenched it through and through
Till every particle glowed clean and new
And slowly seemed to turn
To lucent amber in a world of blue. . . .

I felt a sudden wrench—
A trickle of warm blood—
And found that I was sprawling in the mud
Among the dead men in the trench.

BACK

They ask me where I've been,
And what I've done and seen.
But what can I reply
Who know it wasn't I,
But someone just like me,
Who went across the sea
And with my head and hands
Killed men in foreign lands. . . .
Though I must bear the blame
Because he bore my name.

HIS MATE

"Hi-diddle-diddle
The cat and the fiddle" . . .

I raised my head,
And saw him seated on a heap of dead,
Yelling the nursery-tune,
Grimacing at the moon . . .

"And the cow jumped over the moon.
The little dog laughed to see such sport
And the dish ran away with the spoon."

And, as he stopt to snigger,
I struggled to my knees and pulled the trigger.

THE DANCERS

All day beneath the hurtling shells
  Before my burning eyes
Hover the dainty demoiselles—
  The peacock dragon-flies.

Unceasingly they dart and glance
  Above the stagnant stream—
And I am fighting here in France
  As in a senseless dream.

A dream of shattering black shells
  That hurtle overhead,
And dainty dancing demoiselles
  Above the dreamless dead.

THE JOKE

He'ld even have his joke
  While we were sitting tight,
And so he needs must poke
  His silly head in sight
To whisper some new jest
  Chortling, but as he spoke
A rifle cracked . . .
And now God knows when I shall hear the rest!

CHERRIES

A HANDFUL of cherries
She gave me in passing,
The wizened old woman,
And wished me good luck—

And again I was dreaming,
A boy in the sunshine,
And life, but an orchard
Of cherries to pluck.

THE HOUSEWIFE

She must go back, she said,
Because she'd not had time to make the bed.
We'd hurried her away
So roughly . . . and, for all that we could say,
She broke from us, and passed
Into the night, shells falling thick and fast.

VICTORY

I WATCHED it oozing quietly
  Out of the gaping gash.
The lads thrust on to victory
  With lunge and curse and crash.

Half-dazed, that uproar seemed to me
  Like some old battle-sound
Heard long ago, as quietly
  His blood soaked in the ground.

The lads thrust on to victory
  With lunge and crash and shout.
I lay and watched, as quietly
  His life was running out.

THE MESSAGES

"I CANNOT quite remember . . . There were five
Dropt dead beside me in the trench—and three
Whispered their dying messages to me. . . "

Back from the trenches, more dead than alive,
Stone-deaf and dazed, and with a broken knee,
He hobbled slowly, muttering vacantly:

"I cannot quite remember . . . There were five
Dropt dead beside me in the trench, and three
Whispered their dying messages to me . . .

"Their friends are waiting, wondering how they thrive—
Waiting a word in silence patiently . . .
But what they said, or who their friends may be

"I cannot quite remember . . . There were five
Dropt dead beside me in the trench—and three
Whispered their dying messages to me . . ."

THE QUIET

I COULD not understand the sudden quiet—
The sudden darkness—in the crash of fight,
The din and glare of day quenched in a twinkling
In utter starless night.

I lay an age and idly gazed at nothing,
Half-puzzled that I could not lift my head;
And then I knew somehow that I was lying
Among the other dead.

BETWEEN THE LINES

When consciousness came back, he found he lay
Between the opposing fires, but could not tell
On which hand were his friends; and either way
For him to turn was chancy—bullet and shell
Whistling and shrieking over him, as the glare
Of searchlights scoured the darkness to blind day.
He scrambled to his hands and knees ascare,
Dragging his wounded foot through puddled clay,
And tumbled in a hole a shell had scooped
At random in a turnip-field between
The unseen trenches where the foes lay cooped
Through that unending battle of unseen,
Dead-locked, league-stretching armies; and quite spent
He rolled upon his back within the pit,
And lay secure, thinking of all it meant—
His lying in that little hole, sore hit,
But living, while across the starry sky
Shrapnel and shell went screeching overhead—
Of all it meant that he, Tom Dodd, should lie
Among the Belgian turnips, while his bed . . .

If it were he, indeed, who'd climbed each night,
Fagged with the day's work, up the narrow stair,
And slipt his clothes off in the candle-light,
Too tired to fold them neatly on a chair
The way his mother'd taught him—too dog-tired
After the long day's serving in the shop,
Inquiring what each customer required,
Politely talking weather, fit to drop . . .

And now for fourteen days and nights, at least,
He hadn't had his clothes off, and had lain
In muddy trenches, napping like a beast
With one eye open, under sun and rain
And that unceasing hell-fire . . .
It was strange
How things turned out—the chances! You'd just got
To take your luck in life, you couldn't change
Your luck.
And so here he was lying shot
Who just six months ago had thought to spend
His days behind a counter. Still, perhaps . . .
And now, God only knew how he would end!

He'ld like to know how many of the chaps
Had won back to the trench alive, when he
Had fallen wounded and been left for dead,
If any! . . .
This was different, certainly,
From selling knots of tape and reels of thread
And knots of tape and reels of thread and knots

Of tape and reels of thread and knots of tape,
Day in, day out, and answering " Have you got " s
And " Do you keep " s, till there seemed no escape
From everlasting serving in a shop,
Inquiring what each customer required,
Politely talking weather, fit to drop,
With swollen ankles, tired . . .
But he was tired
Now. Every bone was aching, and had ached
For fourteen days and nights in that wet trench—
Just duller when he slept than when he waked—
Crouching for shelter from the steady drench
Of shell and shrapnel . . .
That old trench, it seemed
Almost like home to him. He'd slept and fed
And sung and smoked in it, while shrapnel screamed
And shells went whining harmless overhead—
Harmless, at least, as far as he . . .
But Dick—
Dick hadn't found them harmless yesterday,
At breakfast, when he'd said he couldn't stick
Eating dry bread, and crawled out the back way,
And brought them butter in a lordly dish—
Butter enough for all, and held it high,
Yellow and fresh and clean as you could wish—
When plump upon the plate from out the sky
A shell fell bursting . . . Where the butter went,
God only knew ! . . .
And Dick . . . He dared not think
Of what had come to Dick . . . or what it meant—

The shrieking and the whistling and the stink
He'd lived in fourteen days and nights. 'Twas luck
That he still lived . . . And queer how little then
He seemed to care that Dick . . . Perhaps 'twas pluck
That hardened him—a man among the men—
Perhaps . . . Yet, only think things out a bit,
And he was rabbit-livered, blue with funk!
And he'd liked Dick . . . and yet when Dick was hit,
He hadn't turned a hair. The meanest skunk
He should have thought would feel it when his mate
Was blown to smithereens—Dick, proud as punch,
Grinning like sin, and holding up the plate—
But he had gone on munching his dry hunch,
Unwinking, till he swallowed the last crumb.

Perhaps 'twas just because he dared not let
His mind run upon Dick, who'd been his chum.
He dared not now, though he could not forget.

Dick took his luck. And, life or death, 'twas luck
From first to last; and you'd just got to trust
Your luck and grin. It wasn't so much pluck
As knowing that you'd got to, when needs must,
And better to die grinning . . .
Quiet now
Had fallen on the night. On either hand
The guns were quiet. Cool upon his brow
The quiet darkness brooded, as he scanned
The starry sky. He'd never seen before

So many stars. Although, of course, he'd known
That there were stars, somehow before the war
He'd never realised them—so thick-sown,
Millions and millions. Serving in the shop,
Stars didn't count for much; and then at nights
Strolling the pavements, dull and fit to drop,
You didn't see much but the city lights.
He'd never in his life seen so much sky
As he'd seen this last fortnight. It was queer
The things war taught you. He'd a mind to try
To count the stars—they shone so bright and clear.
One, two, three, four . . . Ah, God, but he was tired . . .
Five, six, seven, eight . . .
Yes, it was number eight.
And what was the next thing that she required?
(Too bad of customers to come so late,
At closing-time!) Again within the shop
He handled knots of tape and reels of thread,
Politely talking weather, fit to drop . . .

When once again the whole sky overhead
Flared blind with searchlights, and the shriek of shell
And scream of shrapnel roused him. Drowsily
He stared about him wondering. Then he fell
Into deep dreamless slumber.

. . . . .

He could see
Two dark eyes peeping at him, ere he knew
He was awake, and it again was day—

An August morning burning to clear blue.
The frightened rabbit scuttled . . .
Far away,
A sound of firing . . . Up there, in the sky
Big dragon-flies hung hovering . . . Snowballs burst
About them . . .
Flies and snowballs! With a cry
He crouched to watch the airmen pass—the first
That he'd seen under fire. Lord, that was pluck—
Shells bursting all about them—and what nerve!
They took their chance, and trusted to their luck.
At such a dizzy height to dip and swerve,
Dodging the shell-fire . . .
Hell! but one was hit,
And tumbling like a pigeon, plump . . .
Thank Heaven,
It righted, and then turned; and after it
The whole flock followed safe—four, five, six, seven,
Yes, they were all there safe. He hoped they'ld win
Back to their lines in safety. They deserved,
Even if they were Germans . . . 'Twas no sin
To wish them luck. Think how that beggar swerved
Just in the nick of time!
He, too, must try
To win back to the lines, though, likely as not,
He'ld take the wrong turn: but he couldn't lie
Forever in that hungry hole and rot,
He'd got to take his luck, to take his chance
Of being sniped by foes or friends. He'ld be
With any luck in Germany or France

Or Kingdom-come, next morning . . .
Drearily
The blazing day burnt over him. Shot and shell
Whistling and whining ceaselessly. But light
Faded at last, and as the darkness fell
He rose, and crawled away into the night.

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"Borderlands." By Wilfrid Wilson Gibson. (Elkin Mathews. 2*s*. 6*d*. net.)

"Thoroughfares." By Wilfrid Wilson Gibson. (Elkin Mathews. 2*s*. 6*d*. net.)

Mr. Gibson has established his own manner. He is far enough from imitating himself, but he has worked out a poetic method which his temperament can use consistently as an exactly appropriate expression, and which finally makes him independent of any recognizable "influences." His manner is the most distinctive which we shall find in the English poetry of the day. There is not a page in these two new books of his which could be mistaken for the work of anybody else. . . .

Mr. Gibson gets his inspiration direct from life, and he will not allow any previous portrayal, any drawing by somebody else, to come between him and his vision. Human nature itself is the metaphysic of his art—human nature in its endless variety and immeasurable depth; and Mr. Gibson has an astonishing capacity for absorbing human nature. It is not surprising, therefore, that one should so constantly have the sense of novelty in his work; some fragment of life, it frequently seems, has come into poetry for the first time. . . .

His pictures in "Borderlands" of life as an imaginative, idealizing energy have, in consequence, that same quality of solidly assured reality which was so notable in his pictures of life at grips with harshest need. These, too, you feel, have been actual experiences in life. . . .

For the transformation of all this rich actuality into art Mr. Gibson still relies more on the composition as a whole than on any detail. It is true that he allows himself here more room for detail than usual; and we still have to remark the singular rightness and honesty of the phrasing, the determination to say just what is needed, and no more. But, as in "Daily Bread," the composition is the thing. The style of it is a sort of psychological counterpoint. These dialogues might be called "two-part inventions" in poetry: two themes, or rather one theme in two kinds of human

natures contrasting, weaving together, heightening each other, until they have realized themselves in all their peculiar possibilities, æsthetic logic bringing the whole argument to shapely conclusion. In fact, it is form, as musicians use the word, that is the chief thing in Mr. Gibson's art. . . . The way he develops these themes, the wealth of subsidiary variety he gets out of them, and the harmonies into which he disposes them, and the superb shapeliness of each complete combination, make it impossible to call them anything but, in their way, masterpieces.

When a poet has conspicuously broken new ground, criticism is likely to demand that he should go on doing it. It is unreasonable, of course; a poet may justly be contented with the ground he has under the plough, so long as he can get good crops from it. "Borderlands" and the lyrics in "Thoroughfares" show that Mr. Gibson has not begun to exhaust the fertility of his new acres. But, as a matter of fact, he has carried his cultivation still further. Three of the pieces in "Thoroughfares" seem to us quite a new kind of poem; they break once more into ground that has hitherto been fallow. These are "Solway Ford," "Wheels," and "The Gorse." The kind of life in them is as characteristic as ever: the poems take place in the minds of a carter, a policeman, and a convict. . . . Yet Mr. Gibson has mastered this formidable, intractable material into form and significance, the two beginnings of poetry; and the extraordinary concentrated vividness of the writing does the rest. The wild helter-skelter of imagery becomes in each case the symbol of the man's whole life; the tumult builds up a unique piece of vitality, modelled by its past experiences. The carter, pinned under his cart overturned on Solway Sands, crazed by the pain and his knowledge of the approaching tide; the policeman, knocked down on point duty and stunned, his brain filled with a delirium made up of every kind of wheel and wheeled thing he has ever known; the escaped convict, light-headed with starvation and exhaustion, and dazzled by the glare of the sunlit gorse: we realize intensely and terribly what has happened to these men, and we realize as well just what sort of man it is the thing has happened to. For terrifying profusion of imagery, "Wheels" may stand first of the three; but the helpless tragedy of "The Gorse" and the coloured beauty of the deep-sea imagery of "Solway Ford" are perhaps more remarkable. Certainly, if Mr. Gibson goes on breaking new ground in this style, as well as getting such harvests as "Borderlands" from the ground he has already conquered, the critics should have no complaint against him.

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